

INTRODUCTION

PRELIMINARIES

How Hebrew Really Works: Seeing Beneath the Surface

Biblical Hebrew Made Simple — A Companion to Basics of Biblical Hebrew

Chapter Overview

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Learning Biblical Hebrew is less about memorizing lists and more about learning to *see* how the language works. This Companion begins by giving you the big picture: why Hebrew looks the way it does, why the ancient scribes wrote without vowels, and how the sounds of the language shape every word you will ever read. Before we dive into consonants, vowels, and deconstruction, this chapter orients you to the core ideas that will guide your entire journey — helping you understand not just *what* Hebrew does, but *why* it does it.

To give you a clear sense of where we’re headed, the outline below highlights the key ideas we’ll cover in this chapter; you can use the division titles to jump directly to any section and the return link in each section to come back to this index.

Section	Title
00.0	Shlomo's Welcome
00.1	Why This Companion Exists
00.2	The Core Principle: Morphology Comes From Phonology
00.3	Why Ancient Hebrew Was Written Without Vowels
00.4	Learning to See Beneath the Surface: The Optical Illusion
00.5	How Hebrew Words “Crash” Together
00.6	What Deconstruction Trains You to Do
00.7	A First Taste from Ruth
00.7.1	The Torah Scroll
00.8	Vocabulary Sections
00.9	What Comes Next

[Back to Table of Contents](#)



[Return to Index](#)

00.0 Shlomo's Welcome

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read . . . OR . . . to [WATCH](#) video.

“Thus says Shlomo:”

Shalom, and welcome.

My name is שלמה and I live here in Jerusalem not far from the southern steps of the temple. If you were standing beside me now, you would hear the sounds of merchants calling out their prices, and children weaving between the stalls, and pilgrims arriving from every corner of the land. This city has a heartbeat and I have lived in its rhythm all my life.

I am a merchant of fabric and wool and other things that travelers need when they come up for the feasts. The busy seasons are my favorite, especially Passover and Pentecost and the Feast of Booths. The crowds are large and the conversations lively, and the stories are even better.

I walk in what we call the **Way**. I was among the thousands who heard the words of Peter on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of the Holy One moved with power. That day changed everything for me. My wife Sarah and our children joined me in the **Way** soon after. Sarah is a strong woman with strong opinions. She often reminds me of things I should have noticed in the *Tanach*¹, especially in the scroll of Ruth which is her favorite. I pretend to be annoyed, but she is usually right. I have learned much from the Tanach since my youth. The sayings of *Mishlei* have shaped my thinking; sometimes too much, my children say. They claim I can turn any situation into a proverb. Perhaps they are correct. Wisdom has a way of slipping out even when you do not plan it.

I have met many people over the years, some you may know from the writings that have reached your time. I have spoken with Nicodemus, who came to follow the Way after much wrestling. I



¹ **Tanach** is defined in the glossary. See that definition for a full understanding of this term.

have listened to the teachings of John and Peter. Their words echo the Tanach in ways that still surprise me. I once met Saul when he visited Jerusalem early on; though I did not know then what journeys awaited him.

But enough about me. You are here to learn the language of our fathers — the language of the Tanach. It is a beautiful language, filled with patterns and poetry and meaning woven like threads in a tapestry. I will walk with you as you begin; not as a teacher above you, but as a companion beside you. We will take each step together.

So *Shalom* and welcome. Let us begin.

NOTE TO STUDENT: Throughout this book you'll spot little photos of Shlomo or other icons that are linked to brief video clips. Whenever you see Shlomo, it means Shlomo has pulled up a chair and wants to share something with you. It might be a helpful technical tip, a bit of history or culture, or even an entertaining family story that might even embarrass him a little. Take a moment to pause and listen in; Shlomo always has something worth hearing. There are other guest contributors as well so don't overlook their insights about Hebrew or our teaching techniques.

[Return to Index](#)

00.1 Why This Companion Exists²

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Before beginning Chapter 1 of *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (BBH)³, you need understand one essential insight:

Although Biblical Hebrew is no longer a spoken language, the **morphology** (the forms of words) in the biblical text is the written residue of earlier spoken sounds. To read the text well, you must learn to reverse-engineer the written forms and recover the sound-based processes that produced them. Here are a couple very important definitions necessary to understand the deconstruction methodology taught in this *Companion Handbook*.

Morphology⁴: the study of how words are formed — how roots, patterns, prefixes, suffixes, and vowels combine to create meaning.

Phonology⁵: the study of a language's sound system — how sounds are pronounced, interact, and change.

BBH provides the technical information about the **morphology** that resulted from Hebrew **phonology**. This *Companion Handbook* teaches you how to **see** Hebrew — how to take words apart, understand their components, and reassemble them to understand the meaning in real time.

This is the methodology we call **deconstruction**.

[Return to Index](#)

² Throughout this volume, the term “this Companion” refers to the present work, **Biblical Hebrew Made Simple — A Companion to Basics of Biblical Hebrew**. For clarity and consistency, this abbreviated designation will be used in all subsequent chapters, notes, and cross-references.

³ Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019).

⁴ **Morphology** is the study of how words are **formed**—how roots, patterns, prefixes, suffixes, and vowels combine to create meaning. In Biblical Hebrew, morphology explains **why a word looks the way it does** and what each part contributes to its meaning.

⁵ **Phonology** is the study of a language's **sound system**—how sounds are pronounced, how they interact, and how they change when spoken. In Biblical Hebrew, phonology explains **why written forms change** when elements “crash” together and why vowels or consonants shift, drop, or assimilate.

00.2 The Core Principle: Morphology Comes From Phonology

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Hebrew was spoken long before it was written. People spoke words, and only later did scribes create a writing system to represent those sounds.

This means that:

- the shapes of Hebrew words
- the patterns of vowels
- the changes in consonants
- the forms of prefixes and suffixes

...all come from how the words were pronounced.

The written text is not the language itself. It is the **after-image** of the spoken language.

To read Hebrew well, you must learn to:

- break the written form apart
- recover the underlying sounds
- identify the components
- interpret the morphology
- reassemble the meaning

[Return to Index](#)

00.3 Why Ancient Hebrew Was Written Without Vowels

שלמה explains that, for centuries, Hebrew was written with consonants only.

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Click to
[WATCH](#)
video.



The vowels lived in the mouths of the speakers.

When Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language, the **Masoretes**⁶ faced a crisis:

How do we preserve the correct pronunciation of the ***Tanach*** when no one speaks the language anymore?

Their solution:

- add vowel signs around the consonants
- without altering the sacred consonantal text

So vowels appear:

- below consonants
- above consonants
- occasionally inside consonants

These markings preserve the sound system and the morphology, because ***morphology*** is built from ***phonology***.

[Return to Index](#)

⁶ **Masoretes** were Jewish scribes (active roughly from the 6th to 10th centuries AD) who preserved the traditional reading of the Hebrew Bible. They added the system of **vowel marks**, **accent marks**, and **textual notes** to the consonantal text to ensure accurate pronunciation and transmission after Hebrew was no longer a spoken language.

00.4 Learning to See Beneath the Surface: The Optical Illusion

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Consider the famous double-image drawing often called:

“My Wife and My Mother-in-Law.”



It is a single picture, but two different images are present. If your brain interprets the lines one way: you see a young woman looking away. If your brain interprets the lines another way: you see an old woman looking downward. The drawing never changes. Only your interpretation changes.

This is exactly what reading Biblical Hebrew requires; that you be able to see both images in the script *at the same time*.

Hebrew demands double vision

When you look at a Hebrew word, you must learn to see:

- **the surface form** — what the word looks like after the sounds have “crashed” together
- **the underlying structure** — the root⁷, pattern⁸, prefixes⁹, suffixes¹⁰, preformatives¹¹, sufformatives¹², and vowels that produced it.

⁷ **Root** (Hebrew *shoresh*) refers to the basic set of, **usually three consonants**, that carry the core meaning of a Hebrew word. Most Hebrew words are formed by placing these root consonants into different **patterns** (with vowels, prefixes, and suffixes), which modify or extend the basic meaning. The root is the **foundation** from which a family of related words is built.

⁸ **Pattern** (Hebrew *mishqal* for nouns; *binyan* for verbs) is the **structural template** of vowels and syllables into which a Hebrew root is placed. The pattern does **not** change the root’s basic meaning, but it **shapes** how that meaning appears in a specific word — determining its form, its part of speech, and sometimes its nuance. A pattern is what turns a root into an actual, pronounceable Hebrew word.

A beginning student sees only the surface. A trained reader sees both layers at once.

[Return to Index](#)

⁹ A **Prefix** is a change added to the front of a Hebrew word which is part of the grammatical structure of the word, e.g. the imperfect uses **prefixes**, so the 3ms begins with *yod*.

¹⁰ A **Suffix** is a change added to the end of a Hebrew word which is part of the grammatical structure of the word, e.g. the perfect uses **suffixes** to mark person, so the 1cs ends in a *tav yod*.

¹¹ A preformative is a **prefix added to the beginning of a Hebrew word**. It is written as part of the word but functions as a **separate grammatical element**, such as when the preposition אֶ ("in, with") is attached to a noun to indicate that the noun is the object of that preposition. We want to distinguish between a "regular" prefix and a preformative because in deconstruction, they serve different purposes so need to be seen as different types of morphemes.

¹² A sufformative is a **suffix added to the end of a Hebrew word**, especially a verb, that is written as part of the word but functions as a **separate grammatical element**. For example, attaching the pronominal suffix - ׁ ("them") to a verb marks that pronoun as the **object** of the action of that verb. We want to distinguish between a "regular" suffix and a sufformative because in deconstruction, they serve different purposes so need to be seen as different types of morphemes.

00.5 How Hebrew Words “Crash” Together



Click [HERE](#) to watch a video explanation

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

English keeps words separate:

and	in	the	house
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Hebrew does not. Hebrew attaches small words to each other, and when they collide, sounds change.

Before the crash (four separate elements):

וְ — “and”	בְּ — “in”	הַ — “the”	בַּיִת — “house”
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Hebrew order (Read from right to left):

Hebrew Words	וְ	בְּ	הַ	בַּיִת
English Transliteration	Vě	bě	ha	bayit

After the crash:

וּבְבַיִת	“and in the house”
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Why it looks like this:

- וְ attaches directly to the next word.

- בִּי attaches directly as well.
- When בִּי in the second box below attaches to הָ, the הָ drops and the vowel becomes a → בִּי.
- When וְ comes before בִּי, it often changes to וֹ which is an entirely different sound.

So, reading the table below from left to right, you have the four separate words. The first frame on the left shows the four individual words. In the second frame, the first two words have merged (crashed). In the third frame the third word has merged but notice that the הָ (the second word from the left in the first frame) **has disappeared**. The merger caused it to disappear and a dot (a dagesh, explained later) has appeared in the following letter to indicate that merger because it is actually *hiding* behind the bet letter. Finally in the fourth frame, the last word (first word in Hebrew - vav = and) joins the crowd. It also changes it's sound from "ve" to "oo" because of merging with the beth. Looking at these four frames is like ***watching a car accident in slow motion!***

בִּי + הָ + בִּי + וְ	בִּי + הָ + בִּי + וְ	בִּי + בִּי + וְ	וּבִי
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That is what is meant by the "crashing" of Hebrew words. We need to act like the accident investigation team called in to investigate what happened in an airplane crash. They assemble all the parts and piece them back together to find out what happened. In the ***deconstruction methodology***, we see the end product of the "crash" and have to pull apart the pieces and investigate them, then reassemble them back to the form we see in the text. When we are done, we understand the root meaning of the main word, understand the various parts and what they play in the construction, and can properly translate and interpret the meaning in its context.

This is the ***heart*** of the ***deconstruction methodology*** of reading Hebrew. You see both the finished product (the young woman in the dual picture earlier) and the parts that went into that finished product (the old woman in the dual picture). That is what we call reading Hebrew with "double vision."

[Return to Index](#)

00.6 What Deconstruction Trains You to Do

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

By the end of this Companion Handbook, you will be able to:

- identify the root
- recognize the pattern (binyan)¹³
- spot prefixes and suffixes
- spot preformatives and sufformatives
- understand vowel shifts
- reverse assimilation¹⁴
- recover the original components
- reassemble the meaning in context

Shlomo would like to explain what is meant by a Hebrew word ROOT. Click [HERE](#) to watch



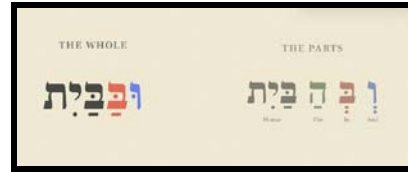
Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

This is how real readers of Hebrew operate. Eventually, you will be able to do it automatically. That is the way you do it in English now. For example when you want to use the phrase "do not" in English, you usually, in casual conversation, contract it and say "don't," don't you? You do that **without thinking** and you know that the modified form "don't" means the same thing as "do not." It has a different **sound** (phoneme) and a different **form** (morpheme) but means the same thing. The change is because the two words "crashed" or merged in actual conversation. The Hebrew text came to us in the same way. It was spoken (phoneme) then the form (morpheme) was memorialized in the script (letters). With practice, you gain fluency in Hebrew and it just "flows" because you automatically deconstruct and reconstruct in your mind as you are reading along, just as you do in English.

¹³ **Binyan:** A structured verbal pattern in Biblical Hebrew that modifies the meaning of a root by applying predictable changes in voice, intensity, or nuance. The plural is *binyanim*. The term actually means "build" in Hebrew. These terms, binyan and binyanim, are not used in BBH, which, instead, uses the term "stem" to refer to the seven major "builds" or constructions of the verb system. Jewish scholars seldom use the term "stem" but prefer the terms binyan and binyanim. In this book we try to preserve the distinctively Jewish or Hebrew cultural flavor of the language so prefer the term binyan.

¹⁴ **Assimilation:** a phonological process in which one sound becomes more similar to a neighboring sound to ease pronunciation.

Deconstruction Explained. The video to the right explains and demonstrates a simple example in English and Hebrew of the deconstruction process.



Click to [WATCH](#) video.

[Return to Index](#)

00.7 A First Taste from Ruth

Listen to the reading of Ruth 1:1 by clicking the Hebrew icon. Notice the first word of the verse.¹⁵

Play it *several times* until you can distinguish it clearly.¹⁶

Click [HERE](#) to watch the video of "Ruth"



Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Here is (are) the first word(s):

וַיְהִי — **vayehi** — “and it happened”

In the video it is translated "and there was." Both are legitimate translations.

A beginning student sees one word. A trained reader sees the "word package":

- וַ — the narrative vav¹⁷
- the changed vowel under the vav
- יְ — the prefix vowel and the yod indicating the imperfect
- הִי — the reduced form of the root **היה**

[Return to Index](#)

¹⁵ **Ted Hildebrandt**, *Hebrew Bible Reading Videos*, Biblical eLearning, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://biblicalelearning.org/hebrew-bible-reading-videos/>

¹⁶ **Video Playback Speed.** If you would like to hear the Hebrew more slowly, Windows Media Player allows you to adjust playback speed. Right-click on the video, choose “Enhancements,” and select “Play speed settings.” A small slider will appear that lets you slow the video to a comfortable pace while keeping the audio clear. Close the Windows Media Player and reopen and it will revert to normal speed.

¹⁷ **Pronunciation of the letter ו.** In the BBH, Section 1.9, it discusses the traditional versus modern Hebrew pronunciation of this and other letters. The BBH prefers the traditional pronunciation of a "w" sound where in this book we prefer to use the modern Hebrew pronunciation of "v" for the ו.

00.7.1 The Torah Scroll.



Shlomo would like to share with you some of his feelings and thought about the **Torah Scroll** and what it represents from his day. Listen to his comments then read on below.

Click [HERE](#) to watch the video



Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

The oldest complete Torah scroll in existence is the Bologna Torah Scroll¹⁸, housed at the Biblioteca Universitaria in Bologna in Italy.

Radiocarbon dating conducted independently at the University of Salento and the University of Illinois places the scroll between approximately 1155 and 1225 AD. Written on sheepskin, the scroll measures 36 meters in length by 64 centimeters in height (about 118 feet long and 25 inches high) and contains the full Pentateuch in Hebrew. It was rediscovered in 2013 by Professor Mauro Perani, who recognized that the scroll had been erroneously catalogued in 1889 as a seventeenth-century document. The scroll remains kosher and conforms to the strict scribal standards governing Torah production — standards that have ensured the textual uniformity of

¹⁸ **The Torah Scroll.** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna_Torah_Scroll

the Torah tradition across centuries and geographic boundaries.

[Return to Index](#)

00.8 Vocabulary Sections

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

As you begin encountering Hebrew directly in the Book of Ruth, it is important to understand how vocabulary will be introduced throughout this book. This curriculum follows a deliberate, research-based approach to vocabulary acquisition, presenting a carefully curated set of 232 core Hebrew words across 36 chapters. These words come from twenty semantic domains¹⁹ of Biblical Hebrew, the essential particle²⁰ tables, and the vocabulary of Ruth itself.

News Flash! There is a new concept in learning vocabulary. What this recent broadcast that explains how it helps learn Hebrew vocabulary!



Click [HERE](#)
to Watch Video

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

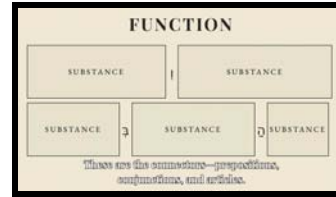
Because Biblical Hebrew relies on a small number of high-frequency roots and a compact set of function words²¹, mastering this set provides recognition of roughly 80–85% of all word occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. Vocabulary begins in small, manageable sets and increases gradually as your skills grow. Words that appear in Ruth are introduced first, ensuring that you can return to the text of Ruth with increasing confidence and comprehension. This structured, efficient method prepares you to sight-read the entire book by the end of the course while building a strong foundation in the most important vocabulary of the entire *Tanach*.

¹⁹ **Semantic domain** refers to a group of words that share a common conceptual field or area of meaning. Words in the same semantic domain are related by idea, not by form or grammar. Organizing vocabulary by semantic domains helps students see how Hebrew expresses related concepts, recognize patterns of usage, and build a mental map of how ideas cluster in the language.

²⁰ **Particle**. A short, non-inflecting Hebrew word or prefix that does **not** take a verbal root and does **not** carry tense, person, gender, or number. Particles express grammatical relationships rather than lexical meaning. They include **prepositions, conjunctions, interrogatives, negatives, adverbs, and pronominal suffixes**. Particles attach to or stand beside other words to mark relationships such as direction, possession, negation, emphasis, or logical connection. Particles are **function words** and are not presented in the vocabulary with the words that derive from roots.

²¹ See the glossary for a full definition of **Function** words, **Substance** words, and **Roots**.

Shlomo would like to explain something that may be a totally new concept for you but that will make a very big difference in how you approach Hebrew vocabulary. What is a Function word and how does it differ from a Substance word?



Click [HERE](#) to Watch Video

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

This approach compares favorably to the typical textbook in Biblical Greek where the Greek text of the New Testament has less than half the vocabulary of the Hebrew *Tanach*. To have fluency in 80% of the vocabulary of the Greek text requires a vocabulary of about 315 words by the end of the first year course in Biblical Greek. By contrast, because Biblical Hebrew relies on a concentrated set of high-frequency roots and essential function words, this approach can accomplish the same level of fluency in the Hebrew text with just 232 core vocabulary items using the concept of **Function** words and the word roots of **Substance** words. This is about two thirds the volume required for the Greek text, allowing you to gain meaningful reading ability with a smaller, more manageable vocabulary load.

[Return to Index](#)

00.9 What Comes Next

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Now that you understand:

- why Hebrew looks the way it does
- why morphology comes from phonology
- why words crash together
- why you must see both surface and structure
- why deconstruction is essential

...you are ready to begin Chapter 1.

This Companion Handbook will guide you step by step through:

- semantic-domain vocabulary
- root-based learning
- deconstruction exercises
- progressive reading of Ruth
- cross references to BBH

Since this Companion Manual does not replicate all the content in BBH, it assumes you have first read the corresponding chapter in that book before coming back to work through that chapter in this manual.

Before Shlomo says goodbye, one final word about where this journey is heading. Learning Biblical Hebrew is not merely about recognizing forms or memorizing paradigms. True mastery grows in **three levels of fluency**:

1. **Reading** — seeing forms and understanding them as you encounter them.
2. **Translating** — expressing the meaning accurately in another language.
3. **Exegesis** — interpreting the text with clarity, nuance, and confidence.

We learn our native language in the same sequence. We first "learn to read" (level one); we then "read to learn" (level two); and finally we "learn to teach" (level three). So in Hebrew as a second language, we "learn to read" (Reading); then we "read to learn" (translating); and finally most people who learn Biblical Hebrew do so in order to either use the exegesis level to preach or teach others in the "learning to teach" (Exegesis level).

Most grammars train students in the first level, some the second, and very few in the third. This Companion exists to help you grow toward all three — not by adding more technical detail, but by teaching you how to *see* Hebrew just like you *see* your native tongue, English. You will learn how to take words apart, understand their structure, and "learn to read" the biblical text with increasing accuracy and fluency. That fluency will lead to better "reading to learn" -- translation

work and, eventually, to "learn to teach" with a more deep and accurate exegesis of the Biblical text.

Click to [HEAR](#) the text read.

Well, this is the end of the Introduction. I hope you enjoyed it. Although *shalom* is the way to say hello, it is also the way to say goodbye. When you say *shalom* to someone, you are saying, "May you be whole, safe, complete, and at peace." So until you move to Chapter 1 — *shalom*.

Click
[HERE](#) to
watch
Shlomo

